



Mountain Men

Fur Hat Fashions

A fashion fad in Europe and America in the early 1800s led to the origin of mountain men. Hats made from the thick fur of beavers became popular among wealthy men. Companies traded with Indians for furs in exchange for knives, rifles, blankets, and other goods. Some fur companies hired their own trappers, equipped them with supplies, and sent them to trap beavers in the streams of the far west.

Many Cultures

Mountain men came from the families of eastern farmers and merchants. They were the children of pioneers and the sons of immigrants. Many were French-Canadian fur trappers called *voyageurs*. Iroquois and Delaware Indians trapped in Oregon, and African-Americans roamed the Rockies. Even native Hawaiians were recruited as trappers by the trading companies. Some mountain men like Jedediah Smith were well read, and others like Kit Carson and Jim Bridger could not read a word. A few were very successful businessmen. Most of the mountain men lived from one trapping season to the next, dependent upon the price of beaver pelts.

Equipment

Mountain men were independent men who usually worked alone. They paid for their own supplies, which were quite expensive. A trapper needed a good rifle for protection as

well as a large knife and a tomahawk. He carried a *possibles* bag made of buckskin, which held sewing gear, cooking tools, and other personal possessions. Mountain men used castor which was an oily, brown, liquid musk taken from the glands of dead beavers. They spread the castor like bait over their hidden traps to attract beavers.

Clothes

Mountain men usually dressed like their Native American neighbors in the wild country where they hunted and trapped. They wore rugged buckskin shirts, leggings, and moccasins. These clothes were warm and durable. Many mountain men also wore extremely distinctive and often colorful hats to demonstrate their individualism and be recognized by other mountain men.





Mountain Men *(cont.)*

Rendezvous

Fur companies organized places for trappers to meet and trade their beaver pelts for supplies, gold, and other things they needed. These yearly events were called *rendezvous* from a French word meaning "appointment or meeting." Mountain men lived and trapped by themselves for a year. They loved the rendezvous because they could talk to others, tell stories, gamble, and compete in wrestling contests, shooting events, and horse races.

Business

Trappers sold their pelts to the trading company for prices varying from \$4 to \$9 apiece. They often had several hundred pelts if they had been fortunate. The companies sold them supplies such as coffee, sugar, and tobacco at prices 10 and 20 times what the cost would be back east. Mountain men were able to make some profit, but they usually spent their extra money on betting, drink, and things they did not need.

End of an Era

The first rendezvous was held in the early 1820s and the last one in 1840. The fashion demands of the time changed, and beaver hats went out of style. Mountain men could no longer make a living trapping beaver, but they were resilient men. They had endured terrible winters and other harsh conditions in the wild as well as brutal battles with men and animals.

They had traveled and mapped large sections of the west in their minds if not always on paper. Mountain men sometimes lived with Indian tribes. Many died because of their dangerous occupation. Others became guides for government explorers or wagon trains. Some of the most famous mountain men are described on the following pages.

Joe Meek

Joe Meek went west at age 19 to become a trapper. He fought the Blackfoot and Bannock Indian tribes and married a Nez Perce girl. In his search for new beaver streams, he traveled the length of the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico and as far west as California. He froze and starved, sometimes eating ants and grasshoppers and the soles of his moccasins. Eventually Joe Meek settled in Oregon with his wife and children.



Reading
Passages

Mountain Men *(cont.)*

John Colter

John Colter was a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition who was allowed to leave the expedition early so that he could join a group of beaver trappers. Colter wandered widely and explored the Yellowstone area although his fellow trappers thought he was lying when he told stories of water and steam bubbling out of the ground, smoking mud, and geysers. They called it "Colter's Hell."

Colter was captured by Blackfoot Indians who were very defensive about intruders in their land. They decided to have him run the gauntlet, racing between two rows of Indians armed with sticks and clubs who would beat him. If he escaped, they would chase him down and kill him. Colter surprised his captors with his speed and agility, dashing through the gauntlet and running away with the braves in hot pursuit. Colter managed to evade all but one brave. He fought him and then dove into the freezing Jefferson River and hid in a beaver lodge all day. At night Colter slipped out of the river and walked 300 miles in seven days to Fort Lisa, near present-day Omaha, Nebraska.

Jedediah Smith

Jedediah Smith was brought up in the eastern United States. As a young man he became a very skilled hunter and woodsman. When he read the journals of Lewis and Clark, he was anxious to see these lands and explore them himself. He was an unusual mountain man in

that he was a quiet listener, carried a Bible with him, and read many books. In one of his earliest adventures as a fur trapper, he was attacked by a grizzly bear that mauled him and actually had his head in its jaws. Another trapper sewed Smith's ear back on and treated his wounds.

Smith explored more of the west than any other man of his time. He explored South Pass, the best route through the Rocky Mountains.

Smith traveled through the Yellowstone area, across the Rockies, along the Platte, Snake, and Columbia Rivers, across the deserts of Nevada, and the length of California and Oregon among many other travels. He kept journals and maps but was killed before he could complete them.

Jim Beckwourth

Jim Beckwourth was a black mountain man who lived with the Crow Indians for many years and fought with them against their enemies, the Blackfoot and Cheyenne. He had several Indian wives and became an important chief and tribal advisor. He was a very successful fur trapper who tried to steer the energies of the Crow people into trapping and trading rather than constant warfare.

1650

1700

1750

1800

1850

1900

Reading
Passages

Mountain Men *(cont.)*

Hugh Glass

Hugh Glass was possibly the toughest mountain man of all. He fought a grizzly bear with a Bowie knife and was torn to pieces and knocked unconscious. Two trappers who had agreed to stay with him until he died became frightened by the possibility of hostile Indians and took his belongings, leaving Hugh to die alone. Glass finally woke up and crawled to a river for water. Eating parts of a bison killed by wolves, other dead animals, and roots, he began a 200-mile journey walking and crawling across the plains to Fort Kiowa. Glass then hunted down the trappers who had abandoned him, although he did not kill them. Young Jim Bridger was one of those men who had left him.

Jim Bridger

Jim Bridger was a very young and inexperienced trapper when he left Hugh Glass to die. He went on to become the best known of the mountain men. He was respected by the many people he guided through the west, including army units and wagon trains. Bridger could not read his own name but he could draw a detailed map of every area he ever explored. He traveled widely through the Rocky Mountains and he was the first white trapper to discover the Great Salt Lake. He ran

a trading company until the market for beaver pelts ended. Bridger built his own fort along the Oregon Trail. He mapped the best route for the Union Pacific Railroad through the Rocky Mountains.

Kit Carson

When he was 16, Kit Carson ran away from the saddle-making shop where he had been apprenticed. He worked on a traders' wagon train on the Santa Fe Trail until he made enough money to outfit himself and become a beaver trapper in the Rocky Mountains. He became a skilled trapper and explorer. Kit married an Arapaho girl and after her death was married to a Cheyenne woman. Both tribes respected his courage and honor. Carson was the chief guide for John C. Fremont's mapping expeditions in the 1840s. He was later an Indian agent and was trusted by the Native Americans he worked with.

Name: _____ Section: _____ Date: _____

Mountain Men

1. What fashion led to the origin of mountain men?
 2. What was the name given to French fur trappers?
 3. Who explored more of the west than any other man of his time?
 4. Which mountain man ran the gauntlet through the Blackfoot tribe and escaped from them?
 5. What was the name of the oily musk made from the glands of dead beavers?
 6. Which area did the mountain men call "Colter's Hell"?
 7. What is the meaning of the word rendezvous?
 8. How often did rendezvous take place?
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9. What kind of supplies were mountain men able to buy at rendezvous?
 10. What animal did mountain men trap in the west?
 11. How much money could a mountain man expect to get for a beaver pelt?
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12. What did mountain men usually wear?
 13. What article of clothing best demonstrated a mountain man's individualism?
 14. Which famous mountain man left Hugh Glass to die alone?
 15. Who was the chief guide for John C. Fremont's mapping expedition?
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16. What noteworthy event was John Colter a part of?

17. What qualities made Jedediah Smith an unusual mountain man?

18. What mountain man was possibly the toughest of them all?

19. What mountain man traveled the length of the Rocky Mountains from
Canada to Mexico?

20. What mountain man needed to have his ear reattached following a grizzly
bear attack?

21. Which mountain man was an African American?

